By Bujar MEHOLLI

THE STAGNANT MUSIC

(Primo Shllaku, *Muzikantët*, OM, Prishtinë, 2017)

Let's imagine the twilight falling over the city of Shkodra. The skies flicker and the city is buzzing below when people move towards the *Grand Café* (Kafja e Madhe), a cultural landmark, the legendary bar-restaurant that once gathered the most prominent personalities of Albanian culture. "*The cafe always opens excatly at six o'clock. The wall clock strikes six times, when the great pointer hasn't reached twelve yet. Its sound fill the bar and vibrate for a long time throughout its corners. After that, no one hears the café's clock anymore. When it's crowded, the café is taken over by human voices, and I can no longer hear its melodious gong.*"[115] The image of an evening beginning with music is created; a clientele frequenting the *Grand Café* and the orchestra on the podium. A sensual tango floating in phantasmagoria, people dance, whisper, gaze at each other, children are enchanted by the entire scene, with the unique atmosphere of this bar. "*Tonight, for the first time, I am playing this piece with the accordion. I have emotions; ever since I was called to join the orchestra of this place, I knew that the accordion is a popular instrument, loved and understood by everyone,*" announces the accordionist.

This is how the story "The Musicians" by Primo Shllak begins, a narrative realized as an imagist prose that absorbs the cinematographic montage techniques through discursive interaction from five different perspectives that complete a certain auditory

115 Primo Shllaku, *Muzikantët*, OM, Prishtinë, 2017, fq 5 (të gjitha citimet në këtë shkrim janë nga i njëjti botim)

coherence as a partiture, apparently, imposed through literary communication, but internally containing reflections on human race, the loss of passion, routine, mediocrity, uniformity, stretched over the regressive socio-cultural dimension of Albanian society in the late '80s.. "*The waiters build their strangest paths in the crossroadsbetween the tables and dance marvelously in the middle of a world that, from where I am, is nothing more than a mess that cannot be grasped*". From this declarative passage of the musician character who narrates, it can be alluded to the difficult albanian situation. Let's replace the word "world" with Albania; among Albania, a mess that cannot be grasped. A stagnancy stretched over the layers of Albanian life that deprives individuality and proclaims the ordinary, even in art.

At first glance, we are dealing with a strange story that stands somewhere between realism and surrealism; when the curtain opens, the story begins with the violinist declaiming*"we are people who work by ears"*. If you start from the title, in the story you would expect something glamorous,, something refined that is mixed with jazz sounds and elegant music. But no! In fact, the musicians of the *Grand Café* orchestra are those *destinies* and *repressed wills*that do their job, live in routine, observing reality down to the smallest details, sometimes banal details, and close themselves in anonymity.. Each of them narrates the story according to their perceptions, according to what they see, think, guess. The violin, trumpet, guitar, drum, accordion, are not just the musical instruments that make up the musical quartet, but they are the people without identity, the actors of the tragicomic scene that in "The Musicians" is presented according to the "shooting" plans of the viewpoint of the bar from the podium through five *actors* who, if we see it as transcendental symbolism, reveal existence, the breathing on earth, the observation of meaningless life and time that takes everything behind it, as Roger Waters writes in the text "Time": "You have enough time to lose since youth fills you up now, but you do realize one day that you left ten years behind... then you start running, you aim for the sun but it evaporates into the sky, it remains the same, but not you, as old as you are, death

isn't that far away"... The relationship between the musicians and the public is built in this way, through observation from a distance, from assumptions, occasional repeated views, curiosity, bursts of erotic-sexual feelings when the ladies below make some moves that highlights their coveted body parts and the musicians feel their hips, than they adjust their dresses, laugh, turn their gaze from the stage. The music continues. Each one engages with their instrument. They anticipate what the night might bring. Routine. These characters bring to mind the surreal-absurd characters of Beckett; for example, when one of the musicians confesses, "*tonight the venue had many surprises; a man got drunk and caused a commotion, a child slipped to a corner table and broke his forehead*" - continuing, "*the butterflies of my accordion fluttered carelessly over the sun-drenched flower-filled meadow; someone said this piece was not danceable; from the end of the venue, a female scream was heard, someone left and sat back down. Then there was another cry, and another*". The story does not include a classic fable, it operates through fragmentation and through the narratives of the five protagonists it legitimizes the cinematic aura, that is, the play/acting on stage. All the characters, besides making music, keep their eyes and ears on every incident around them, whether it's a man getting drunk and shouting, a child getting hurt and amazed, if it's raining outside or the if the bar has electricity problems and darkness envelopes everything inside. They are able to highlight even when "*there are fewer customers and the majority are women and the waiters are more human, they are seen smiling at the tables and leave with their frozen movements, only to return later to initiate a fragment of conversation or sympathy.*"

The author is entirely passive in the story. The tones in which it is narrated are neutral, devoid of any bias, they are exactly a shot of a scene, an imprint of a night at the *Grand Café* with a five-member orchestra playing inside. This is the whole scene, the plot of this prose, at first sight strange and lacking in tension. However, when read attentively, by the model reader that Eco projects, "The Musicians" emerges as a universal story that revolves around the fundamental

problem of existence where human beings fill their days and nights in the vacuum. In a vacuum that beyond the usual musical evening, tortures authentic thought, individuality and freedom of artistic expression; because distinctiveness is lacking, everything follows the determining plan, according to collectivity and dependence on *the other*. The climax, if we can speak of a climax in this symbolic narrative, is reached when musicians and customers are disturbed by the strange entrance of a bat. In literature with anti-fascist tendencies, the bat can be encountered as a symbol of darkness, blackness, socio-political dissolution, and ultimately, death, brought to humanity by autocratic systems. The bat that suddenly enters the Grand Café can be interpreted as a howl that invaded Albanian land, trumpeting the *de facto* regression under the cruel echo of equality and brotherhood - communism. "*Then a black, small, nimble, unexpected, capricious creature hovers through the space of the venue. Women scream, children yowl for analogy. Men, in an attempt to knock down or scare away that flying thing that I say everyone was expecting, don't forget to protect their own heads.*" - This is how the musician describes the entry of a bat , which robs the enjoyment of the musical piece, this "common enemy" that was announced and killed but that is not easy to remove from the cleaner's broom of the cleaner... The bat is just one of the passages of the night in the venue that are accompanied by the music of the orchestra and further enhance the mystery of this prose that has neither a beginning nor an end, the thread of mystery that covers it and the interpretations one can draw from it. Is man truly an animal of the herd, an individual being in a horde led by a boss? Freud says that the individual feels incomplete when alone. So, he must necessarily live within the collective bonds. He must be in the crowd. To be one of them, to be identified through others... the musicians of the orchestra are each inactive on their own and in some way always depend on the other, whom they ridicule, guess about, are anxious about, and fail in attempting to escape and finally continue in the routine of empty life with the sounds of music (!) These participants who depend on the environment

to the core, "accommodate" and do not suffer the influence of the environmental stimulus of the café at all, but absorb and modify the assimilative cycle by adapting it to themselves, speaking in the terms of Jean Piaget. They breathe in emptiness, they live for every night in the act of endless waiting for a change, for an overcoming of the monotony that burdens their existence. Towards the end of the story when the bar empties and the night ends, the emptiness penetrates into the tissues of the rather subtle musician-participants. The rain falling outside only justifies the gloom and preoccupies them to protect the instruments from the wet for the next evening. Let's imagine tomorrow: do you know what will fate bring them?... Their status quo remains unchanged. The musicians of *Grand Café*leave and join each other again or, better said, work, music unite them, even when one of them uses dust as a pretext to turn their back and leave... or when the accordionist just then, at the end of the evening and in peace, wants to enjoy his instrument and play as his heart desires, free, as is music and art, and yet "*he throws a glance at the accordion, it is bright red and shines with its own light. Despite all the songs it knows, despite all the sounds it has in its belly, my instrument now seems like a useless thing,*", echoes the contemplation and submission to destiny. "The Musicians" as one of the successful stories of contemporary Albanian literature consists of details that complete the mosaic of a progressive art, a literature that, apart from the formal side that resembles a musical partiture, reads as a symbolic suggestion imbued with philosophical-psychological meditation.